

# Language & Literature in Tertiary Education: THE CASE FOR STYLISTICS

I N MANY COUNTRIES, STUDENTS ON DEGREE COURSES IN ENGLISH ARE REQUIRED to read a considerable number of literary works. Generally, the major criterion for selecting texts is not their accessibility for nonnative speakers, but their status as major works in the literary canon. Thus Shakespeare, who is far from easy for native speakers, is obligatory reading for undergraduates whose own production of English may occasionally lapse into a comedy of errors.

Students may be asked to produce works of literary criticism when they manifestly lack the analytical methods required to approach a difficult text containing low frequency or archaic lexis, deviant grammatical constructions, and subtle literary devices. Since they have neither the confidence nor the skill to attempt a personal interpretation of the work in question, they inevitably turn to published criticism. Of course, native speakers also do this; many English literature graduates will recall the time they achieved a pass grade for a written assignment that was really no more than an exercise in paraphrasing the words of some eminent professor. It is not unknown for a student to write such an essay without even going to the trouble to read the novel or play on which it is based.

If native speakers are sometimes tempted to repack others' critical opinions, it is hardly surprising if nonnative speakers do not trust their own ability to interpret and evaluate a literary classic. Given appropriate training, however, learners of English as a second or foreign language can develop the necessary skills to find their own way into even quite difficult works of literature.

### What is stylistics?

To understand stylistics, it is important to eliminate the artificial separation of language and literature. McRae (1997:120) criticizes the practice of treating literary study and language learning as separate subjects:

Too often, in university systems all over the world, literature study is not related to language learning; one is considered something of a superior discipline, the other an inferior exercise (often entrusted to lower-level personnel). Language learning and literary study are interdependent and, in a specialist context, should be seen as complementary at all stages in the educational process.

Widdowson (1975) sees stylistics not as a subject in its own right but as the link between two disciplines: linguistics and literary criticism. He presents the mediating role of stylistics as shown in the diagram below.

According to Widdowson's model, the student may start from either language or literature and, passing through the intermediate stylistics stage, progress towards either linguistics or literary criticism. Brumfit and Carter (1986:3) also see a certain overlap between stylistics and literary criticism, the essential difference between the two being "the *degree* of detailed systematic attention given to the analysis of language" [Brumfit and Carter's *italics*]. Short and Candlin (1986:93) believe that the attention to language involved in stylistic analysis makes this approach particularly appropriate for nonnative speakers:

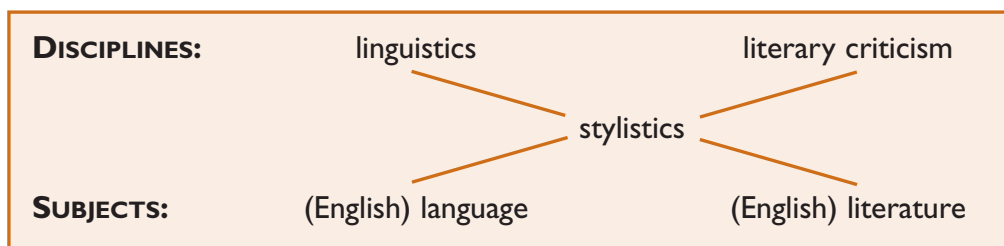
The chief advantage is that, unlike English undergraduates, for example, foreign students have learned how to analyse sentences grammatically and frequently have a considerable awareness of English phonological structure. They are thus often more consciously aware of linguistic structure and better equipped to analyse it and its relationship to meaning than, say, today's native-speaking undergraduate student of English.

Although stylistics entails linguistic analysis, it also develops the learner's literary competence. Learners who possess literary competence have, according to Lazar (1993:12), "an implicit understanding of, and familiarity with, certain conventions which allow them to take the words on the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meanings." The relevant conventions include genres and rhetorical devices as well as interpretative skills. In other words, for nonnative speakers who initially lack the intuitive awareness necessary for literary criticism, stylistics provides systematic training (via the analysis of language) in those interpretative methods that can lead to "ever-increasing appreciation of a writer's artistry in and through language" (Brumfit and Carter 1986:3). Stylistics may therefore be seen as an aid to intuition and a preparation for literary appreciation.

### Discourse conventions and grammatical structure

In poetry it is not unusual to find the sustained use of lexis from a particular semantic field throughout the work. In Emily Dickinson's *I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed*, for instance, twelve of the sixteen lines contain references to alcohol and drinking, while Thoreau's *Sic Vita* develops the lexical field of flowers and plants through seven stanzas. Stylistics is about more than just vocabulary, however.

An important feature distinguishing literary texts from other written genres is the creative writer's willingness to break the usual rules and



(from Widdowson 1975:4)

conventions. James Joyce is an extreme example, but even popular writers will cheerfully invent a neologism, convert a noun into a verb, treat an intransitive verb as if it were transitive, or link words to flout the norms of collocation.

In the case of prose works, we often find that the author's opening sentences employ pronouns in an unconventional way. There can be few language teachers who have not tried to make learners aware of textual cohesion by drawing their attention to the use of pronouns and related possessive adjectives for anaphoric reference. In most non-literary texts the convention is clear: pronouns refer back to previously mentioned people, things, and events.

Let's look at the opening sentence of Hemingway's story *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*: "The marvellous thing is that it's painless," he said." We do not know who *he* is, nor what *it* refers to. Here the two pronouns are used for cataphoric reference; they indicate a person who will be identified and a fact that will be explained later in the text. Revelation is not immediate because a dialogue follows in which we will not even discover the gender of the man's interlocutor until the eighteenth line. We must read on considerably further to learn that *he* is named Harry and *it* is gangrene, which has eliminated the pain from his leg wound. The trick of teasing the reader by deliberately withholding key information is a technique that skillful authors employ to stimulate our curiosity and persuade us to carry on reading.

Newspaper reporters, in contrast, know that their readers want the salient facts quickly and concisely. A useful classroom activity is to have learners read two texts of different genres—one a newspaper report, the other the opening to a short story or a novel—and have them analyse the use of pronouns. It is likely that in the newspaper report all the pronouns will refer back to people or events mentioned in the first two paragraphs. (Indeed, having got the key facts, we often do not bother to read the entire article.) The literary text will probably contain pronouns and high-frequency common nouns that are identified later in the text. By doing this activity, learners will become aware of an important feature of literary prose. A follow-up activity might be to direct attention towards the journalist's repeated use of names and words and the creative

writer's preference for synonym and metaphor to avoid repetition.

### **Stylistic analysis of a Shakespearean sonnet**

Stylistics involves the analysis of structures and lexis in order to understand how the creative writer exploits the ambiguity of language to mean one thing while apparently saying another. For example, an initial reading of the following sonnet by Shakespeare would probably mean little to most nonnative speakers, but its message emerges after thorough lexical analysis.

#### **Sonnet LXXXVIII**

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing;  
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate:  
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;  
My bonds in thee are all determinate.  
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting?  
And for that riches where is my deserving?  
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,  
And so my patent back again is swerving.  
Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,  
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;  
So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,  
Comes home again, on better judgement making.  
Thus have I had thee, as a dream doth flatter,  
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

I have used this poem several times with Italian university students majoring in English language and literature. On each occasion they have been pleasantly surprised to discover that systematic work with a monolingual dictionary enabled them to understand a sonnet that had at first struck them as just so much gobbledygook. My procedure is as follows:

#### **Stage 1**

The students are told that in this sonnet Shakespeare exploits the multiple meanings of certain words. Working in pairs, they use their dictionaries to discover all the meanings of words such as *dear*, *bond*, *estimate*, and *wanting*. I advise them that the double meaning of *dear* in the first line is particularly relevant. (Fortunately for them, the Italian translation, *caro*, is also used both as a term of affection and in the sense of expensive.) There is one archaic term that I have to explain: the Middle English *misprision*, which means a mistake or an omis-

sion, especially on the part of a public official. I also explain that *like* in line 2 means *likely*. My students have already encountered enough English literature to have learnt the archaic pronouns *thou* and *thee* and such related verb forms as *know'st*.

### Stage 2

The students are told to group the content words into just two or three semantic categories. Favourite categories over the years have been evaluation (*worth, deserving, judgement*) and commercial agreements (*charter, bonds, patent*), although other recurrent choices are possession, mistakes, and wealth. By this point the students have worked out that Shakespeare is writing about love using vocabulary normally associated with entirely different fields.

### Stage 3

Attention then focuses on discourse features. I ask the learners to think about the following questions:

- Who is the speaker and to whom is the poem addressed?
- What does the pronoun *it* in the tenth line refer to?
- To whom are the questions in the fifth and sixth lines addressed and do they require answers?
- How do the last two lines sum up the entire poem?

Through this systematic analysis the learners come to understand that Shakespeare uses the terminology of commercial and financial affairs as an extended metaphor for the termination of sentimental relations between lovers of unequal "worth." With this kind of analysis learners generally assume the addressee in this sonnet to be a woman, and that is as it should be since stylistics is concerned with the text, not background knowledge or the author's biography. That the addressee is more likely to be Shakespeare's fair youth is a matter for literary historians, not stylistic analysts.

### Stylistic analysis of a poem

Poetry is by nature highly patterned language, and as such it is sometimes useful to analyse the grammatical forms and syntactic structures employed. In Longfellow's *The Rainy Day*, for instance, the second stanza mirrors the syntactic patterns of the first:

### The Rainy Day

The day is cold, and dark, and dreary;  
It rains, and the wind is never weary;  
The vine still clings to the mouldering wall,  
But at every gust the dead leaves fall,  
And the day is dark and dreary.

My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;  
It rains, and the wind is never weary;  
My thoughts still cling to the mouldering Past,  
But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast,  
And the days are dark and dreary.

Be still, sad heart! and cease repining;  
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;  
Thy fate is the common fate of all,  
Into each life some rain must fall,  
Some days must be dark and dreary.

There are, of course, several lexical difficulties in this poem; the words *dreary*, *weary*, *cling*, *mouldering*, *gust*, *repining* and *fate* are likely to be new to many learners and some will not know the archaic form *thy*. Rather than have the students reach for their dictionaries immediately, it would be better to see what they can infer from context. Because *dreary* follows the adjectives *cold* and *dark*, it is natural to suppose that it describes something unpleasant. That *clings* sits between *vine* and *wall* gives a powerful clue to its meaning. If the learners are told that *gust* usually occurs in the expression *gust of wind*, they should be able to work out what it means. Not all vocabulary can be understood from context, however, and some dictionary work or explicit explanation provided by the teacher will be necessary.

As regards syntactic patterns, it is advisable to consider the first two stanzas together. The first task for the learners (ideally working in pairs or small groups) is to identify the verbs used and the tenses in which they appear. It will emerge that precisely the same verbs and tenses occur in these two stanzas:

Line 1: to be/present simple

Line 2: to rain/present simple,  
to be/present simple

Line 3: to cling/present simple

Line 4: to fall/present simple

Line 5: to be/present simple

It then takes a minute to note the adjectives that appear in both stanzas. The next step is to

	First stanza	Second stanza
Line 1	The day is...	My life is...
Line 3	The vine...clings...	My thoughts...cling...
Line 4	...dead leaves fall...	... hopes of youth fall...
Line 5	...the day is...	... the days are...

compare the subjects of the verbs in lines 1, 3, 4 and 5 (line 2 is identical in the two stanzas). See chart above.

The next stage would be to give the learners some direct questions to answer:

- Are there any possessive adjectives in the first stanza?
- Are there any in the second paragraph?
- In lines 4 and 5 of the second stanza, could we substitute *my* for the article *the*?
- Why do we have *day* singular in the first stanza but *days* plural in the second?
- The title is *The Rainy Day*. Is the first stanza about a rainy day?
- Is the second stanza about a rainy day? If not, what it is about?

At this point the learners should be able to say that the first stanza is indeed about a rainy day while the second employs the same verbs, verb tenses, and adjectives to describe someone's state of mind or feelings. The double use of the possessive adjective *my* could suggest that the poet is concerned with his own mood, although other students might interpret the second stanza as a more general description of a human tendency towards melancholy. Both views can be supported by the text.

Analysis of the verbs and tenses/moods in the third stanza produces the following:

- Line 1: to be/imperative,  
to cease/imperative
- Line 2: to shine/present continuous
- Line 3: to be/present simple
- Line 4: must/modal verb,  
to fall/infinite without *to*
- Line 5: must/modal verb,  
to be/infinite without *to*

Follow-up questions might be:

- There is a word that contrasts with the negative terms (*dark, dreary, mouldering*) of the first two stanzas. What is it?

- Who are the imperatives in line 1 addressed to?
- What possessive adjective can you find? Who does it refer to?
- The modal verb *must* can refer to a specific obligation (I must get up early tomorrow morning.) or to a logical deduction (He completed the New York marathon. He must be very fit.). How is it used in lines 4 and 5?

While analysis of verbs and tenses/moods leaves little scope for personal interpretation, at least two of the questions above do not necessarily have a single correct answer. It could be argued that the poet addresses his own sad heart, or that of the reader, or both. There is similar ambiguity regarding the possessive pronoun *thy*. At this final stage, some disagreement among members of the class is to be encouraged.

Most learners hesitate to express strong personal views on such literary heavyweights as Shakespeare and Longfellow. They feel safer echoing the opinions of experts, that is, their teachers or critics. As we can see from these examples of stylistic analysis, learners can enjoy considerable success in applying their linguistic knowledge to gain insight into how a literary text works, an experience that builds confidence and makes the transition to literary interpretation less daunting.

## Conclusion

In institutions throughout the world students are asked to be literary critics without having a grounding in stylistics. Lacking both analytical methods and the self-confidence to propose their own views, they often resort to the adoption and recycling of "ready-made critical judgements" (Widdowson 1975:117). Unfortunately, premature recourse to published criticism means that learners are deprived of the pleasure that results from unlocking an apparently inaccessible text.

If students are simply told what a work of literature is about, why it is important, and what its strengths and weaknesses are, they will never develop literary competence or the confidence to trust their own interpretative skills. They will concentrate on what the experts say and not read the literary work itself with sufficient intensity. As a consequence, the benefits for their own understanding and use of the English language are limited.

Some will argue that stylistic analysis is time-consuming and that the literature content of a course syllabus would have to be reduced. Perhaps that is not such a bad trade-off: reduction in the number of texts in exchange for the acquisition of interpretative skills and greater learner autonomy. The graduates of such a course would be less cognizant of the views of certain critics, but they would also be far better readers with a more active and independent approach to literary texts. In all probability they would also be better speakers and writers of English since they would have followed a

course that did not impose a spurious distinction between the “serious” subject of literary studies and its poor relation, language learning.

## References

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STEVE BUCKLEDEE teaches English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature of the University of Cagliari, Italy. His favourite tea is Sri Lankan black served strong with just a dash of skimmed milk.

## ANSWERS TO THE LIGHTER SIDE

Answers: agree, alien, angle, anger, dare, daring, deal, dear, dean, deer, deli, dial, dine, elder, endian, gain, gale, garden, gear, gender, gene, general, genre, girl, glare, gland, glide, grade, grain, gran, grand, green, grin, grind, idea, idle, jail, lead, leader, large, land

out of the word DARYFEELING.

Below are some words with four or more letters that can be made

## A WORD PUZZLE DARYFEELING

Answer to puzzle on inside back cover:

1. A; 2. AT; 3. TEA; 4. TEAR; 5. EARTH; 6. REHEAT;  
7. THEATER; 8. HEATER; 9. HEART; 10. HATE; 11. THE;  
12. HE; 13. E

## A WORD PUZZLE

“A DRINK WITH JAM AND BREAD...”

Answer to puzzle on inside back cover: